

CHAPTER VI

CONNECTICUT'S 'THE FOOD CONNECTION'

The Connecticut Department of Social Services (DSS) was one of two grantees that selected an alternative commodity benefit model to increase elderly participation in the FSP for the elderly nutrition demonstration. The program was known locally as The Food Connection. DSS contracted with the Community Renewal Team, Inc. (CRT), the state agency's partner for this initiative, to implement service delivery. Instead of EBT benefits, seniors could elect to receive bimonthly food packages that were available in three commodity combinations—regular, Latino, and items geared towards Meals on Wheels participants. Packages were distributed at various community sites, most commonly senior centers, housing complexes, and churches.

OPERATIONAL DETAILS

Mechanics of Services

The Food Connection was offered in 10 municipalities in the Hartford region. Regional DSS offices in Hartford, Manchester, and New Britain served residents in this area. Their primary responsibility in the demonstration was to assist with outreach by informing new applicants and recertifying seniors about the commodity benefit option. They also coordinated case management procedures with CRT, the program's service provider and community partner. Participating seniors chose among three types of food packages, which were delivered to distribution sites twice a month. Program staff administered nutritional assessments to monitor clients' nutritional intake.

FSP Characteristics in the Absence of the Demonstration. In most DSS regional offices, staff handle all social service programs, which include 16 service categories. The agency uses a common application. In larger offices, tasks are divided according to intake

workers—who conduct eligibility interviews—and case maintenance workers—who determine benefit levels and conduct ongoing monthly case maintenance.¹ In smaller offices, staff assumed the responsibilities of both intake and case maintenance workers.²

Intake procedures are relatively consistent across the state. Most seniors request applications by telephone. Food stamp applications are submitted to regional offices in person, by a designated representative, or through the mail. Upon arrival, a clerk assigns the application to an intake worker either alphabetically or through a rotation system. Once caseworkers receive all necessary documentation such as bank statements and medical bills, they can verify certain information using DSS databases, assuming that the applicant already receives other public benefits. Other information, such as Social Security benefits and Unemployment Compensation benefits, can be verified through electronic interfaces with the agencies that administer those programs. Staff obtain any outstanding information from clients either in person or by telephone, since the face-to-face interview is waived for the elderly.

Procedures for recertification also impose a minimal burden on seniors. Pure elderly households without earned income must recertify every 24 months, while pure elderly households with earned income must recertify every 12 months. Halfway between certification periods, the central DSS office in Hartford automatically distributes letters to clients requesting that they notify their caseworkers as soon as possible if their household incomes and/or expenses have changed. Recertification forms are 10 pages long and include fields for other DSS programs as well, which are left blank if clients need only to recertify for food stamps. Like initial applications, paperwork can be submitted in person, by a designated representative, or by mail. Caseworkers follow up by telephone if necessary.

Four months before the demonstration began, DSS implemented new statewide procedures designed to make applying to the FSP easier for seniors. Officials created a food stamp-only application with larger, easier-to-read type face (7 pages) in addition to the joint application (20 pages). This document facilitates the application process for those already enrolled in other programs. However, staff noted that since most seniors become linked to the FSP when enrolling in Medicare or Medicaid, only a small percentage of them take advantage of the shorter application.

Changes in FSP Policies and Procedures. Caseworkers in the Hartford, Manchester, and New Britain DSS offices were assigned the responsibility of informing new applicants and non-demonstration clients who came up for recertification about the commodity benefit option. Caseworkers were supposed to include a brochure in the application packet that they mailed to potential clients, and then describe the program during the eligibility interview.

¹ Except where a distinction must be made for clarification purposes, this profile refers to both intake workers and eligibility specialists as caseworkers.

² For the demonstration, this included the New Britain office only.

In the early months of the demonstration, staff identified potential Food Connection participants from among existing FSP participants by identifying those residing in the demonstration area. They sent ongoing FSP clients a letter reminding them about the commodity benefit option; the letter also included their calculated EBT benefit amount. In addition, the letter explained that unless seniors contacted their caseworkers to indicate a preference for The Food Connection, they would automatically receive an EBT card.

Caseworkers also had to coordinate with CRT on overall case management for clients participating in the demonstration. This case management is described in the next section.

Food Connection Case Management. Managing Food Connection cases—both clients who enrolled and those who chose to switch back to regular food stamps—required contributions from caseworkers and program staff at CRT. If seniors opted for commodities, the DSS caseworker flagged them in the database. The DSS Central Office forwarded electronic files to CRT, indicating which FSP clients were enrolled in the CRT each month (including new enrollees and ongoing CRT enrollees). Files that included participants whose applications were approved during the month were sent daily to CRT.

Each month, CRT staff compared the electronic file with their current list to identify new demonstration clients as well as those who dropped out. The assistant nutrition director reviewed the list and flagged seniors enrolled in CRT's Meals on Wheels program, who received a special commodity package. She then assigned them a pick-up site based on their home addresses, selecting which households would receive the Latino package based on surnames and neighborhoods of residence.³ The outreach coordinator was notified of any new clients. She sent them a welcome letter that described the weight of food packages, reminded them that CRT could not deliver packages to their homes (unless they were a qualifying CRT Meals on Wheels client), and provided a calendar of food distribution times and locations, along with contact information for Food Connection program staff.

To incorporate new clients into the delivery schedule, a clerk entered relevant data into a spreadsheet that included (1) names, (2) assigned distribution sites, (3) date of enrollment/drop out, (4) type of package, and (5) confirmation of pickup. Staff printed out updated daily lists from the spreadsheet and forwarded them to the warehouse worker the week before delivery. The worker then knew exactly how many and which types of packages to prepare, and could also track which clients picked up their commodities.

If seniors wanted to terminate commodity benefits, they simply called their caseworker, who in turn modified their status in the DSS database (and subsequently the list sent to CRT). However, different procedures came into play if clients failed to pick up packages. CRT sent letters to seniors who forgot once, or more commonly the outreach coordinator called to remind them of the next scheduled pickup time and place. (Program staff estimated that approximately one-third of all demonstration clients failed to come to their appointed distribution site at least once in a given month.) Seniors were given a few days to

³ These seniors could choose a different type of commodity package at the first pickup.

make arrangements for a special pickup, or else they could receive four food bags on the next scheduled distribution day.

If seniors missed two or more pickups, CRT notified the appropriate DSS regional office. Caseworkers in turn contacted the clients to determine if they wanted to remain in the Food Connection or switch back to EBT benefits. If they had difficulty reaching the clients, occasionally a case was passed to a DSS social worker who continued to try to get in touch with the senior. Social workers also could deliver retroactive packages if the client dropped out of the demonstration, which happened a handful of times.

Characteristics of the Commodity Packages. Seniors who enrolled in The Food Connection could choose among three types of packages: regular, Latino, and Meals on Wheels. Clients could only switch once between types and had to accept all food items. The Latino package was geared to the cooking and eating habits of Spanish speakers (for example, more rice and beans). The Meals on Wheels option was intended to supplement the hot meals received by clients by providing breakfast items and healthy snacks (for example, cereal and wheat crackers). Each commodity option had four ‘food baskets,’ with two distributed every two weeks. CRT rotated the food items based on need (certain items were consumed more frequently than others) and weight (different combinations of quantities and food types were arranged to facilitate the transporting of packages).

The cost of the food packages to the Food Connection program was \$43 (\$46 in the second year), which included the cost of the food, shipping, and storage. The comparable price of the package contents at a local Hartford grocery store was between \$60 and \$70 (Cody and Ohls, 2005). All food items were non-perishable except for butter and cheese.

Commodity Storage and Procurement. The Food Connection required a great deal of effort in preparing the storage facilities and obtaining the commodities before food distribution could take place. Program staff needed to ensure that they had adequate space and equipment for storing and assembling food items. Fortunately, CRT had extensive experience in food distribution through its other social service programs. Commodities were stored and assembled at CRT’s central warehouse.⁴ Despite this infrastructure capacity, staff had to make modifications to the space. They ordered two industrial-sized refrigerators for perishable items (butter and cheese), and installed a locked security fence to section off The Food Connection’s operations from the rest of the warehouse’s second floor. Four CRT staff members spent several hours rearranging this section of the warehouse to accommodate food storage and assembly, including arranging tables in long rows where items were stored by food type.

In addition to preparing the warehouse, CRT nutritionists spent considerable time designing the food baskets and obtaining approval from USDA. CRT worked closely with

⁴ CRT also operated a food pantry out of the warehouse. Staff initially intended to use this space until they learned from USDA that they would need to order commodities in bulk by the truckload. Consequently, a larger space was allocated for the demonstration.

USDA to design food baskets that included items from all four food groups, fell within caloric thresholds, and aimed to meet certain dietary restrictions for seniors with health problems. Once the food baskets were approved, CRT ordered the first bulk commodity shipment. Using a USDA agency requisition form, each order was placed three months in advance, and typically one order lasted approximately six months. CRT was somewhat limited in the kind of commodities that they could offer demonstration clients, in large part because they could not predict which food items or brands would be available when ordering the shipment from USDA.

After the food orders arrived, demonstration staff assembled the items into canvas bags for distribution, usually preparing bags one or two days in advance. On a distribution day, staff used lists of client counts for pick-up sites assigned to that day and transported the bags into the delivery van using a loading dock.

Food Distribution. Clients received two food packages per month. Each “package” was contained in two sturdy, canvas bags (and each time clients picked up a package, they returned the empty bags from the previous package). Distribution occurred at 16 sites, most commonly senior centers but also churches, community centers, and apartment complexes. The delivery person helped load packages into cars if needed. Most sites had parking.

Seniors picked up packages on assigned weekdays between mid-morning and early afternoon, although clients could arrange for a proxy to pick up packages as long as they notified CRT in advance. Each distribution day, the driver typically went to two sites. For example, he might go to one site from approximately 10:15 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. and the other from 11:15 to Noon. Often the driver distributed packages from the back of the van and left at the center any packages that clients did not pick up during the distribution time. The driver then returned later in the day to take back to the warehouse any packages that still had not been picked up. Figure 6.1 presents an example of the commodity distribution schedule.

Program staff used a different approach for the small portion of Food Connection participants that participated in CRT’s Meals on Wheels program. For these clients, CRT delivered the food packages along with their hot meals. The warehouse worker delivered these food bags to locations where volunteers normally picked up meals for delivery, where they were stored in coolers until the time of delivery. CRT marked the Meals on Wheels packages with red dots so that volunteers could easily identify which clients should also get food bags.

Nutritional Assessments. In conceptualizing the grant, CRT wanted to include nutritional assessments to better meet the nutritional needs of the elderly. CRT nutritionists designed and distributed short surveys on eating habits, special dietary considerations, and health concerns to new demonstration participants. Seniors filled out surveys on a voluntary basis when they picked up their first food packages. Whenever possible, CRT used the information to accommodate certain dietary restrictions (for example, including low sodium food items for those with high blood pressure). Program staff intended to track and administer the assessments on a regular basis, hoping to explore whether the Food Connection improved nutritional intake for the elderly.

Figure 6.1: Food Distribution Schedule for the Food Connection February 2003

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
3 BLOOMFIELD Bloomfield Interfaith 10:30 a.m. to Noon	4 ENFIELD Enfield Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD Salvation Army Senior Center 10:15 a.m. to Noon	5 HARTFORD North Arsenal Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD South Green (Smith Towers) 10:30 a.m. to Noon	6 EAST WINDSOR East Windsor Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD Hispanic Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon	7 WINDSOR LOCKS Windsor Locks Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD Parkville Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon
10 OPEN	11 NEW BRITAIN New Britain Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon	12 Closed in Observance of Lincoln's Birthday	13 HARTFORD Barry Square Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon MANCHESTER Westhill Gardens 10:30 a.m. to Noon STAFFORD Stafford Community Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon	14 WINDSOR L.P. Wilson Community Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon SOUTH WINDSOR South Windsor Community Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon BLOOMFIELD Bloomfield Interfaith 10:30 a.m. to Noon
17 Closed in Observance of Presidents' Day	18 ENFIELD Enfield Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD Salvation Army Senior Center 10:15 a.m. to Noon	19 HARTFORD South Green (Smith Towers) 10:15 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD North Arsenal Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon	20 EAST WINDSOR East Windsor Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD Hispanic Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon	21 WINDSOR LOCKS Windsor Locks Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon HARTFORD Parkville Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon
24 OPEN	25 NEW BRITAIN New Britain Senior Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon	26 HARTFORD Barry Square Senior Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon	27 MANCHESTER Westhill Gardens 10:30 a.m. to Noon STAFFORD Stafford Community Center 10:45 a.m. to Noon	28 WINDSOR L.P. Wilson Community Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon SOUTH WINDSOR South Windsor Community Center 10:30 a.m. to Noon

Source: Community Renewal Team, Inc.

Major Stakeholders and Roles

DSS and CRT were the main partners in the Food Connection. As the grantee, DSS oversaw the demonstration from a broader policy perspective, with three regional offices processing applications of participating seniors. The state agency contracted with CRT to deliver services and implement food distribution.

The project director, a staff member at DSS headquarters in Hartford, acted as the liaison between CRT and the regional offices. Upon receiving the grant, she outlined detailed procedures for local DSS supervisors and managers. The management teams ensured that their staff carried out policies and procedures according to the demonstration's design, and served as conduits of information between the project director and caseworkers. The director also trained caseworkers as to their roles and responsibilities, which included (1) assisting with outreach by discussing the commodities benefit option with all new applicants and seniors up for recertification, and (2) coordinating with CRT to track new clients and those not picking up their food bags.

CRT assumed complete control of day-to-day operations. Staff nutritionists designed the commodity packages with input from USDA, as well as the nutritional surveys. The organization was responsible for ordering and storing commodities, and assembling and delivering food packages. A driver, who also delivered food for the organization's food pantry, handled most of these activities. In addition, CRT hired a full-time outreach coordinator exclusively for the demonstration to oversee day-to-day operational details. She was the main contact person at CRT if clients or DSS staff had questions. In addition, she coordinated the number and types of packages delivered to each site, and was in charge of public education efforts. CRT volunteers also delivered packages to at-home demonstration clients who participated in the agency's Meals on Wheels program.

Management Structure and Lines of Authority

The project director convened quarterly coordination meetings attended by supervisory staff from the regional DSS offices and program staff from CRT. This provided stakeholders an opportunity to share information, make decisions about demonstration procedures, and brainstorm solutions for problems that emerged. For example, at one such meeting, program officials decided how to address the situation of clients neglecting to pick up food bags twice in a row. Participants generally arrived at decisions at the quarterly meetings by consensus. Still, the director and her supervisor, the state food stamp director, maintained final decision-making authority and responsibility for the grant.

CRT made decisions about various day-to-day operations with official approval from the state DSS office. Within the organization itself, the outreach coordinator and driver reported to the director and assistant director of nutrition. It seems that decision-making was top down (i.e., the director and assistant director of nutrition made all decisions) rather than collaborative in nature.

Means of Communication and Related Issues

To maintain communication, the project director relied on quarterly coordination meetings for DSS management and CRT program staff and minutes of those meetings to remind supervisors about key Food Connection policies and procedures, as well as on informal, sporadic e-mail notifications highlighting changes or clarifications. Despite this, there was a general breakdown in communication, particularly among local office staff. The project director learned—often in roundabout ways—that caseworkers were either misinterpreting or disregarding information from their training, or from circulated memos or e-mails from their supervisors. For example:

- At least one caseworker told seniors that there was a waiting list for The Food Connection; there was never a waiting list.
- Some caseworkers presented the commodity benefit option only to those applicants who would qualify for less than the value of the food packages (\$43 or \$46) in EBT benefits; there was no such rule.
- DSS staff frequently did not take the initiative to bring up the demonstration during the eligibility interview, instead relying solely on brochures inserted into application packets for their outreach efforts.
- One caseworker mentioned The Food Connection only when seniors complained about receiving just \$10 in food stamps.
- CRT reported that sometimes DSS assured clients that commodity packages could be delivered to their homes.

Relations between regional DSS offices and CRT were strained at times, possibly due to caseworkers not following outlined procedures for the demonstration, as well as to initial logistical oversights. Due to confusion surrounding the first month's distribution schedule and procedures, seniors flooded the regional offices with questions about where and when to pick up food. This issue was resolved after the first month or so, but it did not set the stage for cooperation between the two staffs. The two groups had different impressions on how difficult it was to contact each other by phone. Caseworkers heard anecdotal accounts of seniors who could not reach CRT program staff, though some of this may be explained by the fact that seniors are less comfortable leaving voice mail messages and/or do not own phones or answering machines.⁵

During the second year, CRT program staff eventually abandoned the policy of coordinating efforts with the regional offices whenever Food Connection clients failed to

⁵ During the first four or five months of operations, the outreach coordinator was difficult to reach because she was busy helping the CRT driver with food distribution.

pick up consecutive packages. The nutritionists concluded that it was easier to have the outreach coordinator contact the seniors to determine what obstacles may have prevented them from getting their food bags and then simply deliver any retroactive packages.⁶

Problems with regional office staff likely stemmed from the excessive caseload sizes and staff shortages in the regional offices. Statewide layoffs and regional office closings led to increased caseloads and stress for remaining caseworkers (discussed later). As caseworkers explained to the research team, they felt too overburdened to spend the time needed to adequately promote the Food Connection.

It is unclear whether any additional efforts from the central Hartford office would have improved implementation at the regional offices. The project director had intended to design a monthly electronic newsletter for supervisors and managers to update staff on relevant information, but decided against it because she did not want to overburden DSS workers who were already under intense stress due to the state budget crisis. But since she was already informing management of procedural changes and reminders, an additional communiqué would not have been likely to make a significant difference. Even with the quarterly coordinator meetings and departmental newsletters, there was no guarantee that supervisors passed the information on to front-line staff and monitored operations to ensure that the demonstration was being implemented effectively at DSS.

Training

The project director conducted training for regional DSS staff, including management and caseworkers, before the demonstration began. (The same training was repeated once after DSS was restructured). Depending on the size of local staff, she held two or three 45-minute sessions at each regional office. Social workers, who had a peripheral role in the demonstration, were invited but did not attend.

During the training, the director covered (1) the goals of the demonstration, (2) benefits that seniors would receive by choosing the commodity benefit option, (3) eligibility rules, (4) food distribution logistics, (5) new data fields in the DSS database for tracking Food Connection clients, and (6) information to share with clients for outreach purposes. Importantly, she stressed that caseworkers should not sway seniors' decisions and should inform *all* FSP applicants about the commodity benefit option, regardless of their EBT benefit amount. Participants received samples of materials that CRT sends to each new client, including a welcome letter, a description of the regular food package, and a nutritional assessment survey. In addition, the director gave each attendee a handbook version of the Power Point presentation to use as a quick desk reference tool when speaking with clients.

The director did not think that a follow-up training was necessary because everyone seemed to grasp the material. CRT did not hold a formal training for its program staff. The

⁶ They also mentioned that it was too difficult to include the clients' names and DSS identification numbers on the lists sent to the regional offices.

only representative from CRT who attended the DSS training was the supervisor of the person in charge of delivering food packages, although she was hardly involved in the demonstration.

Outreach Strategies

Program officials envisioned a two-pronged approach for reaching seniors. Intake workers at the regional offices would inform new applicants and seniors up for recertification about the demonstration, while an outreach coordinator would focus on public education efforts. Initially, caseworkers served as the primary vehicle for publicizing the demonstration because the outreach coordinator needed to assist with food distribution until operations stabilized. DSS distributed a handful of mass mailings to current elderly FSP clients, notifying them of the upcoming demonstration, as well as to food assistance organizations. Caseworkers, however, did not consistently promote The Food Connection with new senior applicants and those up for recertification. The outreach coordinator from CRT launched an active public education campaign by distributing written materials and making community presentations, yet the impact from her efforts seemed to be limited. Stakeholders generated ideas for community collaborations as a means to help spread the word about the demonstration, but nothing ever came to fruition.

Before The Food Connection, DSS did not conduct any FSP outreach and applications were available only at regional offices. A few community initiatives focused on this issue. End Hunger Connecticut!, a hunger advocacy member organization, received a USDA grant in 2000 to launch a two-year initiative to increase elderly FSP participation rates. Activities included prescreening for food stamp eligibility, application assistance, and a telephone helpline. In addition, the non-profit organization Connecticut Association for Human Services delivered presentations at senior centers and housing complexes to educate seniors about the FSP. It published a 63-page guide on available food resources entitled *How to Get Food in Connecticut*.

Core Themes and Target Audiences. When describing The Food Connection to potential food stamp applicants, CRT and DSS staff usually focused on the higher net gain in benefits that many seniors could expect from commodities, as opposed to an EBT card. A common tactic used by caseworkers was to ask seniors who qualified only for the minimum food stamp benefit level, “How many groceries can you buy for \$10?” CRT also emphasized the variety of food items that clients would receive and their choice among three package types.

Within the first few months of operations, DSS distributed a special mailing to current FSP clients announcing the alternative commodity benefit option; this mailing included a sign-up form that seniors could fill out and return. This first mailing was sent to approximately 3,600 seniors.

The CRT outreach campaign, which focused on public presentations, began around the fifth month of the demonstration. Despite these efforts, DSS staff remarked that during the second site visit that they rarely received telephone calls, walk-ins, or applications due to

community outreach. This could have been explained by the fact that many staff did not appear to raise awareness of the demonstration with seniors, nor did it seem that DSS staff routinely tracked how applicants heard about The Food Connection.

Not surprisingly, CRT initially focused its outreach on its Meals on Wheels and congregate meal clients. These individuals were familiar already with the agencies' services, and program staff believed they would be eligible for the FSP. Afterwards, the outreach coordinator focused on all seniors in the 10 participating towns, though in the beginning, she concentrated her efforts in the Manchester region, due to low enrollment through the demonstration.

Written Materials. DSS and CRT used written materials to promote the demonstration to potential clients. The community agency designed the flyers, brochures, posters, and food package descriptions.

The central DSS office sent Food Connection brochures to food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, and transitional shelters to encourage service providers to refer clients. Caseworkers inserted flyers into the regular application package (materials would not fit into recertification packages), and the central office in Hartford included a brochure in the recertification packets. During the second year of operations, the regional office in Manchester mailed brochures to about 400 FSP households that received less than \$46 in food stamp benefits.

CRT's outreach coordinator periodically hung posters in groceries, pharmacies, and churches, along with atypical locations like laundromats and pawn shops. She also placed flyers on meal trays in all of CRT's senior cafés (i.e., congregate meal sites) and inserted flyers into the hot meal packages for those Meals on Wheels clients served by CRT. According to the nutrition director, the outreach coordinator distributed posters and brochures to all food banks, pantries, and soup kitchens at least three times. To encourage using the commodities in creative, affordable ways, the coordinator designed a cookbook containing various recipes that drew upon the items in the Food Connection packages. The cookbook also included cooking and food storage tips.

Community Presentations. According to the project director and program staff, the outreach coordinator delivered multiple community presentations on a fairly regular basis. Within the first few months of outreach activities, the coordinator conducted presentations at approximately 75 percent of the distribution sites. For example, she gave 54 talks on The Food Connection from January to March 2003. Most sessions took place at senior cafés, but others were at senior housing complexes, churches, community fairs, food pantries, and social service agencies. She always brought samples of the food packages with her, which was an effective method of generating interest among the elderly. Another creative approach was to bake cookies for participants solely with ingredients from the food bags.

Multi Media. CRT relied on multi media techniques to a limited degree. Program staff at the management level—not the outreach coordinator—originally rejected using radio, television, or newspapers to publicize The Food Connection. They reasoned that these media also would reach audiences in the comparison sites, due to the close proximity

of municipalities in this part of the state. However, the assistant nutrition director appeared twice on a local AM radio show to talk about the demonstration. Even though the segments generated some phone inquiries from seniors who did not reside in the pilot sites, staff concluded that possible confusion would outweigh the benefit of reaching more potential applicants.

Community Collaborations. The demonstration had minimal collaborative partnerships, aside from organizations like senior centers and apartment buildings that served as food distribution sites. Their roles were limited to providing space for food pickup, which often took place in their parking lots.

To some degree, program staff attempted to cultivate relationships with community partners but met with little success. From the early days of the demonstration, the project director intended to explore enlisting faith-based groups and other local organizations to deliver commodities on a volunteer basis to seniors who had a demonstrated mobility barrier (for example, a disability or medical condition). This probably would have primarily captured seniors who did not qualify for home delivery through the demonstration because they already received Meals on Wheels services through a non-CRT contractor. When stakeholders discussed this issue at a quarterly coordination meeting, DSS supervisors expressed concerns about using volunteers to deliver foods to non-CRT Meals on Wheels clients. DSS staff worried that they would have no recourse if volunteers were to steal the food packages; if packages were stolen, how would they handle replacement benefits? They also discouraged using high school students because of timing conflicts during the day. Those collaborations that were explored were not fruitful.

The project director did make some headway with the Capitol Conference of Churches, which made a ‘soft’ commitment in the second year, but could only deliver food packages in 1 out of 10 pilot towns. In addition, CRT met with representatives from End Hunger Connecticut! and the Connecticut Association of Human Services to discuss ways that they could contribute to outreach efforts, but nothing came of these meetings.

Staffing Turnover and Shortages

Regional DSS offices grappled with staff shortages resulting primarily from the state budget crisis. In January 2003, less than three months after the demonstration began, the governor’s office projected a \$1 billion deficit for fiscal year 2004.⁷ During that same month, four regional DSS offices were closed. Caseloads from four municipalities transferred to New Britain, and those from four other municipalities transferred to Hartford. Additional staff were not assigned to these sites to manage cases. In fact, office consolidation was accompanied by turnover due to reductions in force (RIF) and early retirement packages.

⁷ The state comptroller announced on April 1, 2004 that the projected budget deficit was actually \$71.4 million.

According to the project director and regional supervisors, higher caseloads and turnover contributed to high stress levels and low morale among front-line workers. At one point during the demonstration, approximately 26 percent of all DSS cases were taking more than 30 days to process. High error rates led to FNS sanctioning the agency.

The project director with the central DSS office and the program staff from CRT remained in their positions throughout the demonstration.

Major Operational Changes During the Demonstration

Program staff instituted several changes, mostly to facilitate food distribution. At the suggestion of FNS, the program staff also modified their policy for dealing with seniors who fail to pick up their packages. In addition, CRT had to scale back some services it initially had planned, due to logistical complications and client demand.

Facilitated Distribution Procedures. CRT took various steps to simplify the food distribution process. Even before operations began, the nutrition staff decided not to use the site managers from its congregate meal sites to oversee food delivery and manage the paperwork (i.e., keeping track of who picked up packages and doing counts of leftovers). They were concerned that involving so many additional people would unnecessarily complicate procedures. It seemed easier to let the driver oversee the paperwork, with the assistant nutrition director's supervision. Other measures taken within the first few months included:

- CRT reduced the number of distribution sites from 21 to 16 (two in New Britain and three in Hartford) because very few clients frequented some sites. This helped simplify the delivery route. In determining which sites to eliminate, CRT ensured that those affected seniors would not have to travel farther to pick up food bags.
- The driver began inserting butter and cheese into food bags when seniors arrived at the distribution site, instead of in advance. This method saved the driver time if he had to take these items out of the food bags and replace them in the refrigerators upon returning to the warehouse. Other changes in assembly procedures cut the per-bag assembly time from 10 minutes to 5 minutes.
- Seniors originally could select the sites where they would pick up their Food Connection packages. However, after program staff recognized that it would be too difficult for them to ensure that the correct number of packages arrived at a given location, they began assigning clients to sites based on home address.
- CRT incorporated holidays into the delivery schedule and created monthly calendars to remind seniors of the dates, times, and locations for food distribution. Staff inserted updated calendars into food bags during each delivery.

Missed Packages. Program staff altered the policy for handling demonstration clients who failed to pick up their food bags several times in a row, either in person or through a proxy. The first policy dictated that after CRT identified which seniors missed multiple packages, a DSS caseworker tried to contact the senior by telephone to determine if he or she wanted to remain in The Food Connection. If staff could not reach them after a few attempts, the case was passed to a social worker who would continue trying to reach the senior by telephone or, if necessary, with a home visit. A DSS social worker also delivered retroactive packages, which occurred fewer than a dozen times overall. The outreach coordinator began calling seniors the day of their scheduled pickup to remind them, which seemed to help the situation.

During the second year, FNS suggested that that DSS automatically switch any senior participating in The Food Connection to EBT benefits who missed three consecutive pickups. CRT staff were supposed to forward monthly lists of such clients to the regional offices, and social workers would deliver retroactive packages so that seniors would not lose any food stamp benefits.

Choice in Commodity Items. CRT originally envisioned granting Food Connection clients the option of indicating preferences for certain food items—essentially giving a food order. For example, seniors might inform CRT that they would like to receive peaches, peanut butter, and wheat bread some time in the next month. However, due to the unpredictability of which commodities were available from the USDA at a given time, and to the fact that USDA orders must be placed months in advance, the organization instead allowed seniors to choose among three package types. In hindsight, program staff acknowledged that this was a blessing in disguise because such wide-ranging choices would have been difficult to coordinate and manage.

Changes in Outreach. After the first year, the outreach coordinator shifted her strategy and began to conduct more one-on-one sessions with interested seniors in locations such as senior centers and grocery stores, as opposed to group presentations. (There is at least anecdotal evidence that some of these one-on-one sessions included application assistance.)

Nutritional Consultant. CRT decided against hiring a nutritional consultant to conduct cooking presentations for seniors at congregate meal sites. While these events would have incorporated a nutrition education element into the demonstration, program staff concluded that seniors did not tend to remain at senior centers to socialize once they picked up their food packages. Likewise, they would be unlikely to stay for cooking demonstrations.

DESIGNING THE DEMONSTRATION

Program Design

The principal goal of The Food Connection was to increase elderly FSP participation rates by offering an alternative commodity benefit option, which might address some traditional barriers that seniors face in applying for food stamps (for example, minimum

benefit amounts not outweighing burden of applying to the FSP). Moreover, program officials hoped to improve the nutritional status of demonstration participants. The state worked with a community action agency—the demonstration’s service provider—during the planning stage. Even though the agency had years of experience in nutrition-related service delivery, some changes to the demonstration’s design might have contributed to a more effective program.

Who Was Involved and How It Unfolded. The initial plan for the demonstration design began with the central DSS office in Hartford. The state food stamp program director chose the commodity model to use as the basis for its application. The rationale for this choice was that the FS Director did not want to run two separate FS programs for the elderly.

After devising a basic framework for the demonstration, the agency needed to contract with an outside service provider to manage food distribution. The state selected the Community Renewal Team, Inc. (CRT), a community action agency that has operated several social service programs since 1963, including Meals on Wheels, congregate meal sites, and quarterly nutrition education classes. The primary reasons why DSS chose CRT were its infrastructure capacity and years of experience with large-scale food distribution.

Both groups wrote portions of the grant application, and the project director oversaw and advised CRT as it designed service delivery specifications. To avoid a burdensome procurement process, the agency reached an agreement to order commodities directly from the federal government instead of the Connecticut Department of Agricultural Services. Staff nutritionists then developed the content of the commodities packages, with feedback from the USDA. They also created a name and logo for the demonstration, as well as publicity materials. Program staff rearranged CRT’s warehouse to accommodate food storage and the process of assembling bags, which included installing a fence for security purposes and ordering two refrigerators for the perishable items. Meanwhile, the project director also designed and delivered training to the regional offices on their new roles for The Food Connection.

Changes to the Design in Hindsight

If DSS were to expand The Food Connection to other parts of the state, program officials might consider measures that could facilitate the program’s implementation and improve its effectiveness. With regard to publicity and outreach, program officials could have priced out the contents of the packages and used this as a selling point. Evaluators performed a cost comparison using average per item pricing.⁸ They discovered that if seniors were to go to a grocery store, they could expect to pay between \$60 and \$70 for the

⁸ Price information was collected on February 18, 2004 at the main grocery store in the Hartford area.

same items. Pricing data could be included on publicity materials, as well as being shared by caseworkers when speaking with applicants during their interviews.

Another outreach strategy would have been to photograph the three commodity packages and distribute prints to all front-line DSS staff. This would have made it easier for caseworkers to promote the program and to answer questions about package contents.

To help improve food distribution in an expanded program, officials might want to place more effort up front—ideally before operations begin—to enlist potential volunteers who could deliver food packages to those clients for whom traveling to the pick-up sites poses a significant burden. The project director speculated that having a plan in place for at least a small pool of home delivery volunteers should have been a requirement in the RFP process that contractors would need to address when applying for the grant.

Finally, CRT staff who played a direct role in The Food Connection should have attended the initial training for staff at the participating DSS regional offices. Allowing the two groups to meet may have helped build better working relations and communication practices. These sessions also would have provided an opportunity for the outreach coordinator to bring samples of the food packages and possibly would have motivated DSS staff about the commodities benefit option.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

A limited public transportation system and a low concentration of grocery store chains were two factors that could have influenced The Food Connection's implementation and elderly participation levels in the FSP. The public bus system in the Hartford area makes it difficult for residents to get around the city. The system requires that all bus lines travel into a central hub station downtown to transfer to different lines. Based on this configuration, a person who needs to go a few miles might end up traveling several miles, depending on the necessary routes. If a senior did not have a car or a relative or neighbor on whom they could rely, then reaching a Food Connection distribution site via public transportation might have been perceived as more trouble than any perceived benefit from the commodities alternative.

Moreover, up until a year or so after the demonstration began, Hartford residents could only shop for groceries at small mom and pop establishments or mini-marts that traditionally charge higher prices. A large grocery store opened recently on the outskirts of Hartford (in fact, it was only a couple of miles away from West Hartford), but it cannot conveniently serve the entire metropolitan area. Given these limited options for grocery shopping, some seniors might now find the commodity benefit option more appealing than purchasing fewer items at higher prices with EBT cards.

CHALLENGES

Program staff faced multiple challenges in implementing The Food Connection. Several issues suggest that groups interested in replicating the commodity benefit option should think through the logistics of food distribution very carefully. Challenges included

the complexities involved in food distribution, less than enthusiastic support from the regional DSS offices and upper-level program staff within CRT, and difficulty in meeting taste and dietary preferences.

Complexity of Food Distribution

Stakeholders repeatedly emphasized how complex food distribution was throughout the demonstration. Program staff mitigated some problems by modifying procedures along the way, such as making changes to the distribution schedule to account for holidays and assigning each client to one pick-up site according to their home addresses. Still, even after streamlining operations, multiple challenges remained that complicated the commodity distribution system. Examples of delivery problems included:

- Transporting the food packages was burdensome for some clients, especially if they did not have friends or relatives who could (1) drive them to the pick-up site, or (2) receive packages as a proxy.
- Food distribution was complex and labor-intensive. Staff operated out of a central warehouse and made two or three deliveries on most weekdays—except on holidays or in severe winter weather. The driver loaded and unloaded packages several times each day, including missed packages. Finally, the driver tracked all paperwork while in the field.
- Conditions in CRT’s warehouse were not ideal for receiving and assembling commodities. The pavement in front of the delivery bay was sloped away from the building, making it very difficult to load and unload deliveries onto the van. In addition, the warehouse was neither heated nor air conditioned, yet staff spent a lot of time considerable amounts of time in the warehouse assembling commodities.
- The actual weight of the packages (20 to 30 pounds each) far exceeded the advertised weight (15 to 20 pounds each), which was a common complaint from seniors.
- Clients found the pick-up times (10 a.m. to 1 p.m. twice a month) to be too narrow and inflexible. Only one or two sites allowed seniors to come until 5 p.m. or make special arrangements with on-site staff (for example, a senior center director).
- Seniors who received letters from the initial promotional efforts from CRT did not know where to send the sign-up forms; no address was included. These forms also did not include a space for the applicant’s name or identification number, which made processing the paperwork more difficult for DSS staff.
- The first few months of food delivery were problematic. CRT did not take holidays into account when developing the distribution schedule; clients were

initially allowed to choose their pick-up site but some still did not know where to go; and at some sites the seniors did not know where to pick up food due to a lack of signage, or were turned away by on-site staff who did not know anything about the demonstration.

- Only Meals on Wheels (MOW) clients who received services from CRT qualified to have Food Connection packages delivered with their hot meals. Other MOW clients were responsible for making alternative arrangements for obtaining food packages.

Initial delivery glitches delayed the publicity and public education campaign for several months because the outreach coordinator had to help the driver with assembling and delivering food packages until distribution procedures stabilized.

Minimal Support from Stakeholders

Another significant challenge was an almost indifferent attitude from many stakeholders involved in the demonstration. To the research team, it was clear that two key groups—many DSS caseworkers and some CRT staff—had not bought into the demonstration.

After meeting with caseworkers, it was clear to the research team that many caseworkers viewed their role in the demonstration as additional work that would have little value to their clients. As a result, many did the bare minimum to promote the demonstration and some did even less. Caseworkers told the research team that they did not have the time to promote the demonstration, and their expectation seemed to be that clients would not like it anyway.

Moreover, it was clear that caseworkers did not have a full understanding of the eligibility rules for participating in the Food Connection. As a result, many were not implementing the demonstration appropriately. At least a few of them shared inaccurate information (for example, that a waiting list was in effect for the demonstration when in fact there was no waiting list) or used inconsistent procedures (for example, only telling seniors who qualified for less than \$43 or \$46 in food stamps about the commodity benefit option). Additionally, two regional offices did not reorder brochures when staff ran out during the second year, even though this would have only required filling out some paperwork. Apparently, some staff would have benefited from more hands-on oversight and monitoring from supervisors, which seemed to be fairly minimal.

A key context for understanding the attitudes of caseworkers is the stressful period of statewide layoffs and office closures, which resulted in substantial increases in worker caseloads. These changes coincided with the start of the demonstration. Thus, within the larger DSS system serving the Hartford region, the details of the relatively small Food Connection program were clearly lost in the stress of working in a crisis mode.

Low expectations also seemed to compromise the efforts of CRT. CRT management told the research team that, given their experience in running large-scale food distribution programs, they never expected the Food Connection to work. They did not believe that

elderly individuals would prefer the packages, given the difficulties with distribution, and they assumed that USDA was funding the commodity demonstration simply to demonstrate that the commodity program would not work. This left the research team questioning whether the outcomes in Connecticut reflected a self-fulfilling prophecy. Anecdotal evidence exists that senior CRT staff limited their efforts within the demonstration. While more junior staff at CRT were much more enthusiastic, their ideas were on occasion reined in by senior staff. Moreover, given the multiple logistical problems that arose, the research team was left to wonder whether more creative solutions to those problems would have been found if the senior CRT staff had expectations of success.

Outreach

Another key challenge was the lack of apparent impact of one-on-one outreach. CRT hired an outreach coordinator to promote the program. The coordinator made presentations about the program to groups of seniors in the demonstration towns. By her account, many seniors expressed interest in the program and told her they would apply. However, often these seniors never did participate in the Food Connection. One explanation is that the seniors never followed through with their intent to apply, or that they were simply being nice when they indicated they would apply. Another explanation is that seniors started the application process but became frustrated and discouraged and never fully enrolled. Still another reason may be that caseworkers never offered these clients the option for the Food Connection, and because the clients did not know they should ask (or were afraid to ask), they ended up enrolled in the traditional FSP program.

Taste and Dietary Preferences

While The Food Connection offered seniors an alternative to traditional food stamps, stakeholders spoke about the difficulty in satisfying clients' tastes and dietary needs. Some advocacy groups criticized the high sodium content in the food packages and the lack of fresh produce. Similarly, caseworkers recounted situations in which clients complained about the unsuitability of many commodities for diabetics. DSS staff speculated that more seniors would have been interested in the demonstration if (1) they could have selected the commodities, like a food order, and/or (2) frozen meat or poultry had been included in the food packages. Some caseworkers and at least one community advocate worried that seniors equated The Food Connection with a food pantry model, serving as a mechanism for the federal government to offload agricultural surpluses on the elderly.

Indeed, the results of the survey of elderly FSP clients in Hartford provide some support for this conclusion. The survey, conducted as part of the evaluation, asked FSP clients not participating in the Food Connection why they did not participate. The most common response was that they could get the type of food they wanted only if they picked it out themselves. It should be noted, however, that individuals participating in the demonstration generally were satisfied with the content of their packages.